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Security Council

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Provisional

6022nd meeting

Tuesday, 25 November 2008, 10 a.m.
New York

President:	Mr. Ballestero	(Costa Rica)
Members:	Belgium	Mr. Kenes
	Burkina Faso	Mr. Koudougou
	China	Mr. Li Kexin
	Croatia	Mr. Jurica
	France	Mr. De Rivière
	Indonesia	Mr. Kleib
	Italy	Mr. Mantovani
	Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	Mr. Dabbashi
	Panama	Mr. Arias
	Russian Federation	Mr. Shcherbak
	South Africa	Ms. Qwabe
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Quarrey
	United States of America	Mr. Wolff
	Viet Nam	Mr. Hoang Chi Trung

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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08-61686 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Lynn Pascoe, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

It is so decided.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda. The Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

At this meeting, the Security Council will hear a briefing by Mr. Lynn Pascoe, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, to whom I now give the floor.

Mr. Pascoe: I would like, Sir, to thank you for the opportunity to brief the Council once again on the Middle East. My comments this month will, for the first time, not touch on Lebanon, given that the Special Coordinator of the Secretary-General for Lebanon, Mr. Michael Williams, together with a colleague from the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, will brief the Council tomorrow on the Secretary-General's report (S/2008/715) on the implementation of resolution 1701 (2006).

Two weeks ago, on 9 November, the Secretary-General chaired a meeting of the Quartet in Sharm el-Sheikh, in which the parties, at their initiative, briefed on the progress in their bilateral negotiations. That was a landmark meeting, the first time that the parties had jointly met with the Quartet, and an important marker of the ongoing political process pursuant to last year's Annapolis conference.

The initiative of Palestinian President Abbas and Israeli Foreign Minister Livni to jointly brief the Quartet is an important precedent for more active involvement of the Quartet in the future. President Abbas and Foreign Minister Livni also met bilaterally in Sharm el-Sheikh, and another bilateral meeting took place between Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas in Jerusalem on 17 November. Also on 17 November, Prime Minister Olmert announced Israel's intention to release some 250 Palestinian prisoners as a gesture to President Abbas prior to the Muslim festival of Eid al-Adha next month.

We regret that Israel and the Palestinians will likely fall short of their commitment made at Annapolis to reach an agreement by the end of the year. However, the parties' affirmation that they have engaged in direct, sustained and intensive negotiations is welcome. The parties' joint assessment that, without minimizing the remaining gaps and obstacles, their negotiations are substantial and promising is also noteworthy. The parties stated that negotiations would continue uninterrupted and that their goal remains a comprehensive peace agreement addressing all issues, without exception. Further, the parties recommitted to the implementation of their Road Map commitments, on which more urgent action is vital to ensure the credibility of the process.

Negotiations are expected to continue through the coming period, although domestic politics both in Israel and among the Palestinians may complicate matters. Prime Minister-designate Tzipi Livni's inability to form a coalition Government — owing in part to differences over Jerusalem — prompted President Peres on 28 October to call for new elections, which are now scheduled for 10 February 2009.

Palestinians remain divided. Further to an Egyptian proposal to Palestinian factions concerning reconciliation, Egypt invited them to a meeting on 9 November in Cairo. However, Hamas did not attend. The Secretary-General calls on Hamas and, indeed, on all Palestinian factions to work urgently to reunify the Gaza Strip and the West Bank within the framework of the legitimate Palestinian Authority, in a manner that allows the peace process to move forward.

However, rhetoric between Hamas and Fatah has intensified. The Central Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) announced its election of Mahmoud Abbas as President of the State of Palestine, but the Hamas leadership has rejected that move. Foreign ministers of the League of Arab States will meet in Cairo on 26 November to discuss the situation in Gaza, the internal Palestinian situation and the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Unfortunately, recent developments in the occupied Palestinian territory and in Israel underscore

the fact that the gap between the political tracks and the situation on the ground remains large, posing considerable obstacles to the path that lies ahead. Israeli-Palestinian violence during the reporting period resulted in the deaths of 16 Palestinians — 15 militants in Gaza and one armed civilian in the West Bank — while injuring 122 others, mainly civilians. One Israeli was killed in a stabbing attack in Jerusalem on 23 October, and 25 Israeli soldiers and civilians were injured during the reporting period.

The *tahdiya* — or period of calm — in Gaza and southern Israel, in effect since 19 June, has been threatened by a number of violent incidents. Israel conducted a military incursion into Gaza on 4 November for the purpose of destroying a tunnel that was alleged to have been used to abduct Israeli soldiers. Six militants were killed, and Israel conducted a number of limited smaller incursions into Gaza over the following days. More than 123 rockets and 118 mortars were fired by Palestinian militants into Israel or at the crossings for people and goods between Israel and Gaza, injuring one Israeli civilian. The Secretary-General has repeatedly condemned rocket and other attacks by Palestinian militants on Israeli civilian targets, and I reiterate his condemnation here. We urge an end to rocket fire and call upon the parties to fully respect the calm.

Between 4 and 23 November, the Israeli authorities severely restricted the access of humanitarian workers as well as of commercial and humanitarian goods to Gaza. Those restrictions caused suspensions of food aid from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East and the World Food Programme, which have affected hundreds of thousands of Palestinians.

Owing to shortages of fuel, the Gaza power plant shut down for more than 12 days, and rolling blackouts of up to 8 hours a day in some areas of the Gaza Strip were reported by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs during the reporting period. Fuel availability was also significantly reduced in the open market, as the import of petrol, diesel and cooking gas had been blocked since 5 November. There is a severe shortage of cooking gas in the Gaza Strip affecting homes, and now 30 bakeries out of a total of 71 are not operational. Lack of fuel is also one of the principal factors leading to water rationing throughout the Strip, affecting approximately 600,000 people. Despite the closure, approximately 23 medical cases were allowed through the Erez crossing on a daily basis.

Rocket fire decreased dramatically on 23 November, and on 24 November Israel reopened the Kerem Shalom crossing, allowing 28 trucks carrying basic humanitarian supplies to enter, and also facilitated the delivery of some 440,000 litres of industrial fuel to Gaza's power plant, as well as the delivery of 240 tons of wheat and 560 tons of animal feed through the conveyer belt at Karni. According to the Government of Israel, rockets were fired from Gaza towards Ashkelon yesterday evening. Defence Minister Barak ordered all crossings closed again today. Despite the fuel deliveries, the Gaza power plant is still not working, because of a technical malfunction and a lack of spare parts. Appeals have been made to Israel to allow such parts into Gaza.

Major news agencies and organizations have protested to the Israeli Government that foreign and Israeli media have not been allowed entry for more than 14 days.

The Secretary-General spoke with Prime Minister Olmert on 18 November and with Foreign Minister Livni on 20 November to express his deep concern over the consequences of the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Gaza. The Secretary-General restated his condemnation of rocket fire, but stressed that Israel must uphold humanitarian principles. In public statements on 14 and 21 November, he strongly urged Israel to facilitate the freer movement of urgently needed humanitarian supplies and of concerned United Nations personnel into Gaza, and emphasized that measures that increase the hardship and suffering of the civilian population of the Gaza Strip as a whole are unacceptable and should cease immediately. The Secretary-General is pleased that some humanitarian supplies and some fuel have been allowed into Gaza and expects Israel to resume facilitating regular deliveries of both. In that context, we note the resumption of the Egyptian-brokered calm and hope that it continues.

We continue to call for the release of Israeli Corporal Gilad Shalit. No progress has been reported in the efforts to secure his release and that of a number of the more than 10,000 Palestinian prisoners in Israel. The International Committee of the Red Cross has still not been granted access to Shalit 27 months into his captivity.

In the absence of Palestinian reconciliation, approximately half of all teachers and a quarter of all health workers are still on strike in Gaza, and both strikes have been extended until the end of the year. According to the World Health Organization, as a result of both internal disputes and restrictions on imports into Gaza, 95 essential drugs and 174 medical supplies are out of stock.

We are concerned about reports of human rights abuses committed in Gaza under the de facto Hamas regime, which has also apparently strengthened its control, divorcing Gaza's institutions from those of the Palestinian Authority.

In the West Bank, Palestinian security forces continue to make progress in implementing phase I Road Map obligations by extending security operations in areas under Palestinian Authority control. On 25 October, the Palestinian Authority deployed 550 new security personnel in Hebron. A further security operation in Bethlehem commenced on 24 November and is expected to run through the Christmas holiday period.

The forces deployed in Hebron have taken measures to enforce law and order and to seize illegal weapons and explosives. We note that in the past weeks, more than 350 Hamas affiliates were reported to have been arrested across the West Bank, including some 250 in Hebron. It is important that suspects being detained on criminal or public security grounds be treated with full respect for human rights and the rule of law.

It should be noted that, despite the Palestinian Authority's security efforts in the West Bank, there has not been a significant reduction in incursions by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) or in the easing of closures in the West Bank. There were approximately 400 search campaigns during the reporting period. The number of obstacles to Palestinian movement in the West Bank stands at 630.

On 29 October, following a six-month suspension in demolitions based upon commitments made to Quartet Representative Tony Blair, Israeli authorities resumed the demolition of houses and structures lacking building permits in area C of the West Bank. Forty-seven structures were demolished in area C and approximately 150 Palestinians have been displaced or otherwise affected. A further eight house demolitions were reported in East Jerusalem, displacing or otherwise affecting approximately 50 people, including a man and his wife who were evicted from their home in which they had been living since 1956. The man, who had been hospitalized due to diabetes and other health problems, died on 23 November. We urge the cessation of house demolitions in the West Bank in accordance with the moratorium, and that no unilateral actions be taken in Jerusalem that undermine confidence or alter the status quo in the city.

In that context, it is deeply regrettable that settlement activity in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, is ongoing in the vast majority of settlements. More positively, we note that, on 2 November, the Government of Israel announced its intention to immediately cease all funding for illegal outposts in the West Bank. An attempt to dismantle an outpost near Hebron on 26 October was met with violence by settlers that injured eight members of the Israeli security forces and seven Palestinians, including a 95-year-old woman. Settlers clashed with the IDF and Palestinians following the issuance of Supreme Court orders to vacate a building in Hebron. In total, there were 30 attacks by settlers on Palestinians during this reporting period. Those attacks have been condemned by senior Israeli officials.

The construction of the barrier within occupied Palestinian territory in deviation from the Green Line continues, contrary to the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice. Also contrary to Israel's phase I Road Map obligation, Palestinian institutions in East Jerusalem remain closed by Israeli military order.

On 22 and 23 November, the Palestinian Investment Conference — Northern Forum took place in Nablus, attracting over 250 international participants, including a number from Arab countries, with the aim of promoting the Northern West Bank as a region for investment.

The Palestinian Authority continues to strengthen its fiscal management and completed the payment of all its wage and private sector arrears during the reporting period. The budget and planning process for 2009 is fully on track. The Ministry of Finance has reported that by mid-November approximately $1.6 billion in direct budget support had been transferred. However, there is an urgent need to increase budget support pledges for 2009 and to support the Authority through the delivery of planned, regular commitments as soon as possible.

Quartet Representative Tony Blair visited the region twice during this reporting period and continued his efforts to bring about the implementation of measures agreed to with the Government of Israel in May 2008, with the goal of improving the situation on the ground and achieving a better economic environment and increased movement and access.

Special Coordinator Robert Serry held meetings with Syrian Government officials in Damascus on 24 November to discuss regional developments and express support for the continuation of the indirect Israel-Syrian talks. The situation in the occupied Syrian Golan remained quiet, but Israeli settlement activity continues.

During the reporting period, the importance of the Arab Peace Initiative was widely discussed as a vital platform for reaching the goal of a comprehensive regional peace. We commend the initiative and efforts of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, which led to the convening of the high-level meeting of the General Assembly under the agenda item entitled "Culture of Peace" here in New York on 13 November. As the Council is aware, the meeting was attended by numerous leaders from the Middle East region, including King Abdullah of Jordan and King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, the Amirs of Kuwait and Bahrain, President Sleiman of Lebanon, President Peres, Foreign Minister Livni and President Abbas, among many others. Additionally, on 20 November the Palestine Liberation Organization published full-page advertisements in Israeli newspapers to promote the Arab Peace Initiative among the Israeli public.

As the past month has demonstrated, the political process is still under way, but developments on the ground remain the biggest challenge to building lasting peace. There is a need for tangible improvements in the living conditions and security of civilians to give them faith in the political process. In order to make progress in the negotiations and improve the situation on the ground, it is important that the Quartet continues to push the process forward in this time of transition. In addition, the Secretary-General has urged United States President-elect Obama to engage early in the Middle East.

Our shared goal remains clear: an end to the occupation that began in 1967 and the achievement of an independent, democratic and viable Palestinian State living side by side in peace and security with Israel. We will continue to work for that goal through comprehensive regional peace in the Middle East and the implementation of all the relevant Security Council resolutions.

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): I thank Mr. Pascoe for his briefing, which, as always, was very comprehensive and balanced.

In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion of the subject.

The meeting rose at 10.40 a.m.